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Library Profile/Fairfax Cty. (VA) Public Library

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Library Profile

Column Editor, Joyce Ogburn (Yale University)

Fairfax County (VA) Public Library

by **Barbara C. Dean** (Assistant Coordinator for Collection Analysis, FCPL)

One of the wonderful things about libraries is how they adapt their methods of operation to meet the needs of their user communities. I came to Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL) three years ago after eight years in the academic library world. Because of that experience, I think the best way for me to tell you about FCPL's operations is to compare them with general academic library operations. I will focus on our collection development plan, selection, and some vendor services that are invaluable to us.

To put my remarks in context, you first need a brief description of the system's size and organization. Notice that public libraries describe their size by population and circulation as well as by number of volumes. The Fairfax County Public Library is a regional library system serving a population of 818,584 people with approximately 1.7 million volumes, and an annual circulation of over 8 million volumes. With twenty-two branches, the system serves the County and the City of Fairfax. Rather than having one main branch we have six regional libraries each with an average annual circulation of 770,800 volumes. They serve as reference resource centers by offering the most comprehensive collections as well as online searching. One regional library also houses our special collections for business and Virginia. The ten community libraries have smaller circulating and reference collections, and no online search facilities. Their average annual circulation is 316,130 volumes per branch. The six mini-libraries are essentially storefronts offering current, popular books and periodicals with an average annual circulation of 84,607 volumes each.

Technical Operations for all the branches is centralized with Collection Development, Acquisitions, Cataloging, Circulation, Automation, and the Office of Evaluation and Information, responsible for library research and oversight of online information services, combined in the division. Collection Development

and Acquisitions became one department in October of 1990.

The first task of any library is to identify its users' needs. Rather than examining the curriculum and the depth into which subjects are taught on campus, FCPL studies the County's changing demographics within the context of the multiple roles public libraries fulfill in a community. These roles include encouraging an interest in reading by young children, supporting elementary and secondary school assignments, providing opportunities for life-long learning, acting as a clearinghouse for information about community services, providing reference services, providing current high-demand, high-interest materials, and supporting community activities and programs occurring at the library.

These roles form the backdrop for the collection development policy. The policy is organized by type of material rather than by subject to better represent segments of our user community and their needs. Two examples are the adult circulating materials, and juvenile circulating materials. Currently, we are writing scope statements and descriptions of the level to which we collect for inclusion in the written policy. Materials on the same subject may appear in the adult collection, juvenile collection and/or in one of the non-print collections. For example, to augment our collection of books on how to do home repairs we may purchase videos that show exactly how repairs are done. Books on Civil War history appear in the adult circulating collection for Civil War buffs and in the juvenile collection to support homework assignments.

We have also created a conspectus for the collection representing the subject areas in which we collect. In time, the document will reflect in which collection policy categories the subjects appear as well as more definitive indications of the level to which we collect. Even in this partially refined

state, however, the conspectus is useful as a selection tool as well as a weeding tool. For subjects not represented in the collection we are working toward more effective referrals to lead users to other libraries in the area that do have the resources they want to use.

Like many academic librarians, public librarians frequently double as selectors. FCPL used the same arrangement until 1987 when all selection and collection management tasks were made the sole responsibility of the collection development department. The department has three selectors: one person selects adult fiction and high demand titles, non-print material, and spearheads our on-going project to evaluate the collection for currency and balance; one person selects juvenile circulating materials, periodicals, foreign language and English-as-a-second-language materials; the third person selects reference materials and services, and adult non-fiction.

Collection Development encourages suggestions from the branch staff by distributing the Collection Priority Survey every two weeks, and creating a dBASE file of the responses to make them easier for selectors to use. Patrons may also suggest additions to the collection. Unlike faculty requests which are virtually always ordered, staff and patron requests must be compatible with our collection plan for them to be acted upon.

Once selections are made, the vendors are chosen. Timeliness of receipt is of particular importance especially when dealing with titles mentioned on television, in a local newspaper, or appearing on the bestseller list. Consequently we look for vendors who can deliver books to us in as little time as possible. Some can provide 24-48 hour turn-around for titles in stock. We also look for vendors who can provide us with the ability to select titles before they are published. The

major approval plan we have for adult circulating materials is all done on forms prior to publication. Included in this service is a monthly list of titles the vendor thinks will be bestsellers. This list, coupled with our selectors' own judgments based on the author's past achievements, the size of the title's print run, and the amount of money devoted to the advertising campaign, make it possible for most bestsellers to appear in our branches before they appear on the list.

Unlike campus libraries which house collections more or less unique for that institution, our branches carry many of the same titles. Because we have six regional libraries rather than one main branch, we generally buy multiple copies of selected titles. We will buy copies for other branches if the title is compatible with the scope of community and mini-library collections and if the anticipated demand is high. For example, it is not uncommon for us to purchase 22 copies of a mid-list trade title, and we regularly buy about 100 copies of a projected bestseller. To deal

with the dramatic decrease in demand for bestsellers over time, we usually lease between 22-44 copies to augment those purchased for the collection.

Our need to buy multiple copies also affects vendor selection. Frequently we can get a very satisfactory discount because of the number of copies we buy, but we may also receive a partial shipment, only 11 copies of a title rather than the 16 ordered, for example. Our standing agreement with vendors is that we do not accept partial shipments. Because the number of copies ordered identifies our distribution plan, checking in copies at the time of receipt and then storing them until the other copies arrive is unmanageable.

A third vendor service we look for is the ability to provide comprehensive collection programs. Because our library system continues to grow, we are often in the process of building an entirely new collection for an opening branch without additional selection staff. Fortunately, vendors have de-

veloped a variety of services to aid libraries. Some provide a service that allows a library to specify subject areas, level of readership, and bibliographic or review sources which the vendor then uses to create a list of potential purchases for the new collection. The selector chooses titles from this list knowing the vendor will be able to fill our order. Other vendors offer lists or bibliographies of titles that are suitable for an opening day collection for one or another segment of the collection. The characteristics of the services differ, but they have proved to be valuable time savers for selectors and for acquisitions librarians who have a smaller number of purchase orders to send out, and fewer vendors to deal with.

Here, then is a profile of collection development and acquisition operations at the Fairfax County Public Library. The differences between our methods and those of academic libraries are significant and frequently lead to varying concerns. These concerns, however, are expressed within the mission of all libraries, to provide a good resource for our user community. ☛

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